

The Avenger Of Death

Harlan Ellison

- [The Avenger of Death](#)



The Avenger of Death

by Harlan Ellison

The first one Pen Robinson killed came to his attention partially through the good offices of the Manhattan branch of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He had been holding a dusty copy of *Burke's Peerage* when they took him into custody.

They came for him — two frosty agents who had bought their suits at the same Big & Tall Men's Shop — just after two-thirty on Saturday. The bookstore — “just off Broadway, rare books and technical texts in Good Condition” — was busier than usual because of the two Puerto Rican boys who had approached him the previous Monday as he was unlocking the shop. They had braced him, suggesting a way in which he — Meester Robinson of Robinson's Good Used Books — could attract new business, “guaranteed *absolutamente*.” For a small fee, they would undertake to slip under the windshield wipers of every automobile parked between Eighth Avenue and Park, between 42nd and 59th Streets, a flier advertising whatever Meester Robinson wanted to push that week.

Pen had gone to the Kinko instant print shop on Lexington, and had ordered three thousand fliers extolling the arcane virtues of books scented with shelf dust and written by men and women who had vanished into the lonely posterity of the Dewey Decimal System.

The boys had been as good as their word, and mailboxes, doorways, lunch counters — and windshields — had worn his fliers throughout the week. Pen had paid them gladly; and Saturday was busier than usual when the FBI chilled the doorknob of the shop, entering to take him into custody.

One moment he had been standing there, dusting *Burke's Peerage*, and the next he was crossing the sidewalk on 51st Street, being sternly guided by a cold hand, slipping as effortlessly as an exhalation, into the velour darkness of the black limo double-parked in front of the shop. Fifteen minutes later he was somewhere in the towering abyss of the Pan Am building, seated in a moderately comfortable knockoff of an Eames design, being punctiliously but courteously questioned by a man half his age. Pen Robinson, at age fifty-five, looked no older than forty; and his judgment of the inquisitor's youth may have been faulty. He was under no misapprehension about the quality of the man's eyes, however.

He thought, *I'm glad I never have to look out of those eyes*. He knew he would not like the world seen from that side.

"You called a bicycle shop in Queens yesterday," said the wearer of the bad eyes.

"Uh, yes..." Pen was wary.

"Why did you call that number, Mr. Robinson?"

"It was a wrong number."

"Whom," he said precisely, "were you looking for at that number?"

Pen furrowed his brow. He had no idea where this was going. "They said they were from the FBI. The men who brought me here. I never asked to see their identification. I suppose it's against the law to say you're from the FBI if you're not. Are you really the FBI?"

The young man neither nodded nor blinked. "Whom were you seeking at that number, sir?"

"Maybe I ought to ask to see your credentials. I don't even know your name ... there's nothing on the door out there. How do I know you're — "

The young man leaned forward, resting his pale, freckled hands on his desk blotter. The desk was empty of all but the leather-framed blotter, and a pair of pale, freckled hands. "You don't want to get yourself in any deeper, do you, Mr. Robinson? You're only here for a visit; you understand that the liaison we share, at the moment, does not involve the possibility of arrest, imprisonment, detainment, any of that. You understand that, don't you?"

Pen was frightened. People vanished, it happened all the time; and not just in Latin American dictatorships. Right here in the United States, it could happen: Judge Crater, hundreds of children every year, Jimmy Hoffa. And those who vanished into *apparats* controlled by people who spent their time spying on one another. There had to be hidden places where the vanished were taken. And from there to other locations ... from which one never returned ... or if you did, the years would have been stolen, and your loved ones would never recognize you ... to come back as an old, old man they did not know. There were no loved ones: Pen was alone in the world. But that only made it worse. If they decided he would never return, who but the New York State tax assessor would try to find him?

"Look, I don't know what this is all about," he said, trying to get back to whatever safe place he had unknowingly abandoned. "But this is all crazy; it's a mistake of some kind. Why don't I just tell you what that call was about."

"Why don't you tell me that, Mr. Robinson." No resonance: flat silver panes of reflective glass.

So he told him how inconsequential it had been.

"I bought a library at an estate sale. From an agent in Detroit. It was one of the last elements of the dissolved estate of a man who had

worked for GM for many years. I was told there were hundreds of technical journals and books of design.” He paused a beat to clarify. “My store specializes in technical texts.”

The eyes blinked. Pen took that as encouragement.

“I was opening the crates ... so I could catalogue what had come. I was slapping them.”

Another blink. Pen was beginning to get the drill: he clarified.

“Slapping them. Flat banging two books together to get the dust off them. Then I turn each one upside down and riffle the pages; for good measure. A check fell out of one of them. I picked it up, and it was a check that had been written by a man named Henry Chatley. The address was in Queens. It was a perfectly good check drawn to cash, in the amount of something like one hundred and fifty dollars. It was only two weeks since it had been written, it was a check someone could cash. I called the number on the face of it. A man answered and said it was some bicycle repair shop. I thought I’d misdialed, and called back, and got the same man. I dialed very carefully the second time. So I didn’t know what to do.”

The mouth beneath the eyes moved. “How did it get there?”

“How did *what* get there? The shop, the man, what?”

“The check, Mr. Robinson. How did the check get into that book?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“You say you bought these books from the library of a man who lived in Detroit.”

“Yes. He died, and they liquidated his assets to pay outstanding taxes.”

“This was an old book?”

Pen shrugged. “I didn’t check the copyright, but I’d say it had been in his library for years, yes, I think I can say that.”

“What was the title of this book, that you say the check fell from?”

“I’m not *saying* it fell, it *did* fall. I didn’t make this up!” He felt anger rising despite his caution. “And what if I *am* making it up, what’s the problem here? I did a decent thing, I made a good samaritan phone call; I got a number that had been changed. Obviously, that’s the answer. What is it you *think* this is all about?”

“I don’t think it’s about anything, sir. I’m asking a few questions.”

There wasn’t anything to say to that, so Pen sat and waited. It had to stop sometime; perhaps now.

“So you don’t know Henry Chatley.”

Pen said, very seriously, sitting forward and placing his hands opposite the pale, freckled pair: “I wouldn’t know Henry Chatley if he walked through that door. I have never *met* a Henry Chatley; I have

never *heard* of a Henry Chatley; and I wish to god I'd never seen his damned check! Now does that satisfy you? Have I been here long enough for you to run me through your computers or whatever you do, long enough for you to understand I'm a used-book seller and not Ashenden the Secret Agent?"

The young man with the bad eyes said nothing. He looked at all the parts of Pen's face, as if certain duplicity would reveal itself in dark lines if he applied enough visual pressure. Finally, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Robinson."

Pen was astonished. It was over, as abruptly as that. His inquisitor obviously meant for him to go.

"That's it?" he said. Now he was annoyed. It seemed he should have ended with a bit more fanfare ... *something*!

"That's it, sir."

"Not even going to tell me what this has been about, are you? Not even a word, right? Just let me march out and find my way back to my place of business, from which you dragged me for this waste of time!"

"Goodbye, Mr. Robinson." The door opened behind him, and he felt a chill. The cold hand touched him again, and he knew it was time to get up, now, right now, and go with the agent.

Three minutes later, he was on the street.

He was hailing a cab when it hit him. How *did* that two-week-old check, written on a New York bank, by a man whose phone number had been changed with such impossible swiftness that it had already been reassigned to a bicycle repair shop in Queens, get into a book that had sat on an old man's bookshelf in Detroit for possibly decades? And who the hell was Henry Chatley?

* * *

In the cab going back uptown, he felt as if he stood poised before a membrane. Where he stood, on this side, it was the real world, the mimetic universe, a place of order, even if this thing with the FBI made no sense, was something out of *Alice*. On the other side, through that translucent curtain, lay a great many small items, only imperfectly seen, but probably very important. Where the check had come from, how it had gotten into the book, who Henry Chatley was ... or had been. He had an overwhelming sense of certainty that Henry Chatley, whoever, wherever, was dead.

But how to get through the membrane?

He needed a trope, a metaphor, a puff of smoke, a rabbit for the hat. Twenty minutes later, back in the shop, near to closing time, the

rabbit manifested itself.

While he had been at the Pan Am building, his clerks had tended to the benefits proffered by the two Puerto Rican boys. The shop was empty.

He decided to lock up early, cleared the cash register, gave out the paychecks, and watched as the clerks wandered up the street, seeking weekend euphoria. He stared out the front window for a time, then locked the doors and stared out the window for a longer time. In all, it had been only twenty minutes, yet in that time he had resisted the impulse to find the book again: not once, but a hundred times.

Finally, he went back into the storeroom, to the stack of books he had removed from the crate the day before. He had not lied to the inquisitor. He really *didn't* know which book it had been. When the check had floated to the floor, he had laid the book on the stack beside the crate, and had taken no further notice of it. If all was as it had been, the book should still be there.

It was. One of the clerks had placed a folded newspaper atop the stack, but otherwise, everything was as it had been. He picked up the book. *Elements of Structural Design*, with a copyright notice of 1926. Pen held the book in both hands, and stared at it; then, as he flipped the pages, he discovered two more pieces of paper.

The first was part of a press release for a book titled *Tian Wen: A Chinese Book of Origins*. It had been torn off, possibly having been used as a bookmark. It bore an excerpt from the twenty-three-hundred-year-old Taoist catalogue of mythology, philosophy and pre-Imperial legend. It read as follows:

1

> > > Of the beginning of old,
Who spoke the tale? < < <

2

> > > When above and below were not yet formed,
Who was there to question? < < <

3

> > > When dark and bright were obscured,
Who could distinguish? < < <

He had no idea what it meant. He *never* understood such riddles, though apparently entire nations found the words urgently meaningful. The only one of such epigraphs that had ever made sense to him was: *The oxen are slow, but the Earth is patient*. That seemed peculiarly appropriate now, even if the three excerpts from *Tian Wen* were not.

So he continued flipping the pages of the book, and came, at last, to the stiff file card wedged into the spine fold. Printed on the card were the words CHATLEY and WHERE THE WOODBINE TWINETH.

Under these words, written in a fine hand, with an ink pen, was the direction *Take by truck, corner 82nd and Amsterdam, Friday, 7:17 pm.*

He took the IRT uptown to 79th and Broadway, and walked quickly to 82nd and Amsterdam. He expected to find a shop, or an apartment, or something that related. He found nothing but the dead faces of apartment buildings as night fell.

But he knew he had been intended to find *something*. However the three seemingly disconnected pieces of paper had found their way into that book, he understood in his meat and bones that it was he, Pen Robinson, who had been meant to discover the puzzle, and to solve it. He had never been a mystic, lived life surely in the pragmatic universe of shelf dust and self-prepared meals after work, and knew there was a logical explanation waiting for him here on the corner of 82nd Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

He loitered. He leaned against a wall and studied the street. Nothing, for the longest time. He looked to the rooftops, and then to the filthy New York sky. Nothing, for a longer time. He felt his eyes closing. He knew he shouldn't be weary, nothing really exhausting had happened to him that day. Perplexing, emotionally taxing, but not truly something to make the flesh sag. But the waiting was beginning to take its measure of him.

And the rabbit came again.

Across the street, directly opposite his station, a pale blue light pulsed softly from the stairwell leading down to a basement apartment. He studied it for a while, and then slowly walked across 82nd to the apartment building. He looked over the wrought iron railing, leaning between heavy black plastic bags of garbage waiting for the truck some distant morning. In the stairwell, lying on his back, was a man with a hole in his chest. From the hole pulsed a distressingly blue light, and as Pen watched, the hole expanded slightly, and the glowing light colored the man's anguished face. He was in terrible pain.

Pen walked to the gate in the railing, slipped the latch, and walked down the stone steps to the filthy bottom. He knelt beside the man, and looked into his face. "Henry Chatley," he said. He knew who this had to be.

The man looked up at him, and nodded with the tiniest movement. "You found the termination order," he said, the words sighing from between lips that barely moved.

The glow pulsed steadily, as Chatley's chest was being eaten away; and Pen could see inside him. It was like looking into a cauldron of soup being roiled by an invisible ladle. "What's happening to you?" Pen said urgently. He felt he should be doing something for Chatley, but this new strangeness was more frightening than anything

that had yet happened. "Is there something I can do?"

The man made an attempt to smile. It was a thin rictus, the corners of his mouth twitching for just an instant. The sound coming from the glowing hole in his chest was faint, but if Pen leaned closer he could make out the unmistakable keening of mountain winds. Whatever was happening to Chatley, it had been intended that he would suffer. Pen asked again if there was some help he could offer: a hospital, moving the man's limbs to a more comfortable position, some kind of cover that would block the hole?

Chatley shook his head without much actual movement. "I took George S. Patton and Bert Lahr."

Pen said, "What? Say again, please: I couldn't make that out."

"Patton and Bert Lahr. And Huey Long and Groucho Marx. I took them."

"Took them? Took them where? Were you a cab driver? What?"

"I took them where the woodbine twineth. And Ansel Adams. I took him."

"Who are you, Mr. Chatley? What are you saying to me?"

Chatley looked up, and for a moment there were ages in his eyes. And enormous measures of pure pain. And the sense of things rushing away from the lens of his sight, while mountain winds howled. "I worked for the Dust Man. I collected for him. Got notices and did the actual work."

Pen had no idea what he meant.

That was not quite true.

He had an idea, but it lay so far beyond the membrane, on the shadowy side of other realities, that he could not countenance it.

Chatley said, "The Dust Man. The reaper. He laughs when he calls himself Boneyard Bill."

"He did this to you?"

"I did this to myself. He gave me a termination order for you. I didn't do it. So he had George fulfill the order on me."

Pen remembered the file card in the book. "Take by truck."

Chatley was speaking so softly now, Pen had to lean in almost to his mouth. The blue glow had spread, the hole was gigantic, nearly from armpit to armpit. "George isn't as adept as he should be. The truck threw me over the railing. I've been waiting for you. I'm glad you came." These words were spoken so haltingly, so filled with dying air, that it took him several minutes to release them.

"Why didn't you take me?" Pen asked.

Chatley would have shrugged, had he been able. As it was, he twitched terribly, saying, "If it hadn't been you, it would have been my next order. Should have been the woman before you. The order was an epileptic seizure, death all alone, in the evening, dressed to go

out to dinner with her daughter.” He closed his eyes against the pain, and said, “Her name was Emily Austin. In California. It should have been her, but I was still afraid. I’m still afraid; it hurts very much; Bill likes to hurt. But he may not be done with me. There was a taker once, a while ago, Ottmar, he got word back to some of us ... the same way I got the papers into the book for you to find ... he said it didn’t stop after Bill had his way. Not for orders like you or Emily Austin, you’re on the books. But for us, the takers. Bill likes to hurt. He doesn’t get as much of a chance as he’d like.”

“Can I help you in *any* way?”

Chatley opened his eyes. There was distance behind the color. He was on his way. The blue glow had eaten its way down through his stomach. “You know.”

“I can’t do that,” Pen said, wishing he hadn’t.

“Then why ask?”

“What would I have to do? I don’t think I can do it, but what would that be ... to help...?”

Chatley told him. It was simple, but it was unpleasant. Then he said, “You can always tell one of us by the eyes.” And he described the bad eyes Pen had seen watching him across a desk earlier that day. He lay silently for a long time, as the blue glow ate away the flesh and the bones and Pen could see the maelstrom swirling inside him. Then he said, “If you’re going to do it, please now. It’s very bad now. It’s very bad.”

And so Henry Chatley became the first for Pen Robinson.

But when Chatley was gone, perhaps having been saved from the Dust Man’s special attentions on that other plain beyond the membrane, Pen realized he had not asked what the Chinese epigraphs meant, nor why he had written a check for cash in the amount of one hundred and fifty dollars, nor how he — using Ottmar’s method — had been able to get the papers into that old book, nor what had turned him against the Dust Man, nor what had finally broadened his courage to defy Bill, nor what the takers posing as FBI men had sought to find out from Pen (but perhaps it had only been a matter of needing to be convinced Pen was an unsuspecting bystander), nor the answers to the other questions that now would never go into the solving of the puzzle, the passage through the membrane.

And one morning very soon, the truck would pick up a black plastic bag filled with remaining parts.

* * *

Pen gave over the running of the shop to the clerks.

He wandered the city, looking into people's faces.

He found the taker who had fulfilled the orders on P. T. Barnum and Babe Ruth and Adlai Stevenson, among others. Those were the names she remembered best, the ones she would tell him about. He found her eating dinner alone at the Russian Tea Room, and he followed her home, and did what he would never have thought himself capable of doing. He forced his way into her building, then into her apartment. He tied her to a chair and asked her more than a hundred questions. Chatley had died before he could answer those questions, more than a hundred Pen had been too distracted to ask. She possessed the bad eyes Henry Chatley had described, so Pen was able to do what he had to do. But she knew only a few things, despite her age. She did as she was told. Had been doing it for a very long time; and Pen learned that it was because of the gift of *a very long time* that many takers hired on.

It seemed to Pen a poor reason for working at such an unpleasant job. And when she told him, with resignation, that now he would have to put her out of Bill's reach, because of finding her and talking to her and interfering with her anonymity and making her suspect in Bill's eyeless sockets, he said he couldn't do that, and she began to cry, which Pen thought was shameless of her, and she told him some of what it would be like, but he already knew that because he had crouched beside Chatley, and she said if he had even a spark of human kindness, a vestige of human decency, he would do what had to be done, and he thought that was even crueler of her to say, because where did human kindness and human decency enter into *her* job description? Had she said anything to Babe Ruth when she took him? Had Adlai Stevenson given her unassailable reasons for demonstrating human decency and kindness?

"You mustn't leave me for Bill!"

"It would serve you right."

"*Please!* Show some compassion!"

"My god, this is an obscenity!"

But in the end, he did it. Because thinking about all the reasons why he *couldn't* do it, which were all the reasons she had ignored and *did* do it, made him so desolately angry that he couldn't stop himself. And so with the second one he became the avenger of Death.

* * *

He found the taker who had gotten Ernie Pyle, and he killed him. He found the taker who had arranged for John Lennon and Fiorello La Guardia and Brendan Behan, and killed him. He found the taker who

had gotten Mackenzie King and Marilyn Monroe and Frank Herbert, and he killed her. He found the taker who had gotten Sergei Rachmaninoff and Eleanor Roosevelt and Helen Keller, and he killed him. He sat behind the one who had taken Emiliano Zapata and Leon Trotsky and Amelia Earhart and Aleister Crowley as she stolidly watched an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. She was a very old, blue-haired woman, and she studied the film as if preparing for a final exam. And Pen waited for a car crash, reached into her lap, pulled out a knitting needle; and he killed her. He saw the taker who had been his inquisitor, and he followed him into a restaurant, and when he went to the men's toilet followed him again, and didn't even ask whom he had gotten, because he knew the list would be long and filled with people whose names he would not know, and which the taker would not remember, and he simply killed him. But not once did he ask the question that transcended, in simplicity and importance, all the hundreds of questions he *did* get answered.

Not once did he ask a taker why the Dust Man was not making any effort to stop him from decimating the ranks of his chosen agents, why he was allowing Pen Robinson to course through the city being the avenger of Death.

* * *

On the first day of winter, in Central Park, near the statue of Alice, he saw a taker about to put his hands on a child climbing a rock. Pen moved in, feeling his years in his aching bones, and he was about to use the icepick on the man whose hand stretched toward the little girl, when he felt a chill that was not part of the season, and a hand dropped onto his shoulder. The voice behind him said, "No, I think not, Pen. That will be enough. It's certainly enough for me."

In the moment before the cold hand turned him away, Pen saw the taker reach to the child, and touch her on the ankle, and the child fell. It lay on the crackling icy grass, and the taker moved off, casting only a momentary glance at Pen and his companion. The taker was frightened.

Then Pen was turned, without seeming effort, and he looked at the face of the Dust Man. He had not seen that face in forty-one years.

Tears came to his eyes, and he reached out to touch the chest of the reaper, the reiver, the slayer of nations; and he said, "You went away and I never got to say goodbye."

Pen Robinson's father, who had died in a mill accident when Pen had been fourteen, smiled down at his boy and said, "I'm sorry, Pen. But I've spent a long time getting back to you, and I've missed you."

Now Pen could see clearly through the membrane; and he understood why Henry Chatley had been permitted to contact him; and why he had found it so effortless, after a quiet, empty, essentially lonely life of shelf dust and cold meals prepared after work, to do the things he had done.

And he walked with the Dust Man, whose name was Bill, as had been his father's name, through the membrane and straight into a long lifetime position in the family business.